



**Congressman Lee M. Zeldin**  
**First Congressional District of New York**

July 6, 2020

The Honorable Donald J. Trump  
President of the United States  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Trump,

I write today in support of my legislation, H.R. 1749, the *PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program Act*, to be implemented as part of your recent Executive Order #13861: President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide or PREVENTS. I commend you on your leadership in the fight to eradicate the suicide rates of Veterans, Guardsmen, Active Duty Servicemembers, and Reservists.

The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that more than 6,000 veterans have taken their own life every year since 2008,<sup>1</sup> and according to a September 2019 report, 541 Active Duty Servicemembers and Reservists took their own life in 2018.<sup>2</sup> Your Executive Order makes it clear that we, as a nation, need to do more to put an end to these suicide rates.

Recommendation #7 of your Executive Order states that the Task Force should “identify, evaluate, and promote community-based models that are effectively implementing evidence-informed mental health and suicide prevention programs across the country. In doing so, they should leverage relationships with community-based efforts, non-profit organizations, faith-based communities, VSOs, and MSOs focused on saving the lives of Veterans.” I believe that H.R. 1749, which has wide bipartisan support with 41 cosponsors, can help in our shared mission to eradicate the suicide rates of Veterans, Guardsmen, Active Duty Servicemembers, and Reservists.

You may remember seeing the viral photograph of PFC Joseph P. Dwyer carrying an injured Iraqi child to safety in 2003. Sadly, when PFC Dwyer came back home to Long Island, he returned with the mental wounds of war, and, after years of struggling, he lost his battle with PTSD in 2008. Understanding that PFC Dwyer was just one of many local veterans struggling, I created the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Veteran Peer Support Program as a New York State Senator in 2012.

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<sup>1</sup> O. (2019). 2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report (p. 8, Issue brief). Washington, DC: Department of Veterans Affairs. doi:[https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019\\_National\\_Veteran\\_Suicide\\_Prevention\\_Annual\\_Report\\_508.pdf](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019_National_Veteran_Suicide_Prevention_Annual_Report_508.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> DOD Releases Report on Suicide Among Troops, Military Family Members. (2019, September 26). Retrieved from <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1972793/dod-releases-report-on-suicide-among-troops-military-family-members/>

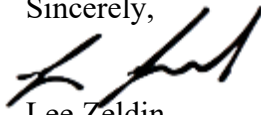
H.R. 1749 would authorize the Department of Veterans Affairs to make grants to state and local entities to carry out the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Program on a national level. The Dwyer Program is a peer-to-peer support program for veterans suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). This model provides a safe, confidential, and educational platform where all veterans are welcome to meet with other veterans in support of each other's successful transition to post-service life and seeks to build vet-to-vet relationships that enhance positive change. This program also incorporates a variety of therapeutic activities such as horse training and fishing that provide for common experiences, learning and personal growth. Many veterans have said that talking with therapists and trying other treatments have helped with their PTSD and TBI, but it wasn't until they connected with other veterans that they were able to feel understood and heard.

Countless times I have had veterans tell me over the last several years that the Dwyer Program saved their life. We have an opportunity to ensure that veterans all across our country have this same ability to access the help they need to overcome their struggles and understand that they are not alone in this battle.

My home county of Suffolk County, New York, was one of four test counties in New York, and since then, the program has successfully expanded to 23 counties across New York State, saving lives and assisting tens of thousands of New York veterans battling PTSD and TBI. The way the program is organized - providing grants to localities - has allowed each county to customize their individual program to their needs and the resources they have available while running an incredibly efficient and effective program. It has been remarkable just how far a small investment in funding can go with the Dwyer Program model. There is absolutely no doubt this program has been successful in New York State, and I believe the Dwyer Program can save countless more lives if it is implemented nationally under your administration.

Thank you again for your leadership on this very important issue, and I look forward to working with you and the Task Force on creating long lasting solutions in the effort to eradicate the suicide rates of Veterans, Guardsmen, Active Duty Servicemembers, and Reservists.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lee Zeldin', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Lee Zeldin  
Member of Congress

Cc: The Honorable Robert L. Wilkie, Secretary, Department of Veterans Affairs  
Dr. Barbara Van Dahlen, Ph.D., Executive Director, PREVENTS Task Force  
The Honorable Mark Takano, Chairman, House Veterans Affairs Committee  
The Honorable Phil Roe, Ranking Member, House Veterans Affairs Committee